

BUYING HELP

INTRODUCTION

If you don't know what type of product you need, or you're wondering whether or not a particular product will work with your computer, contact *Buying Help*.

If you want to buy a new desktop or notebook computer, please provide details of how much you want to spend and the type of tasks you want your new PC to perform.

If you're looking to buy an upgrade for your computer, you need to include as much information about your current system as possible. Knowing your computer make and model, processor, amount of memory and motherboard model can help us to provide a more accurate advice.

Chris Finnamore

Our Labs Manager can recommend the best product for your specific requirements.

buyinghelp@computershopper.co.uk



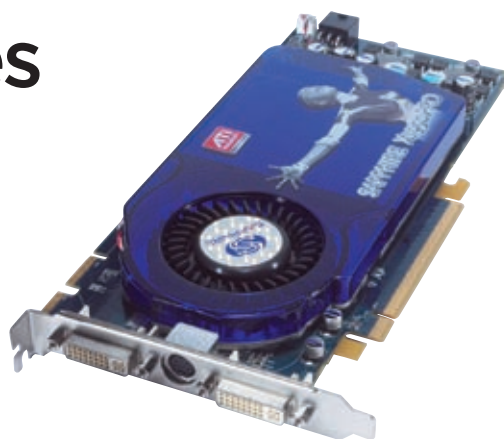
Crossed wires

Q I've just bought an Asus M2R32-MVP motherboard and was wondering if you could give me some advice on which graphics card I should get to go with it. I'm looking for a keenly priced card with good performance that has TV-in and -out connectors. It also needs to support CrossFire, as I'm planning to add a second ATI graphics card later. What do you recommend?

Arthur Hayes

A Unfortunately, most relatively inexpensive ATI graphics cards include only a video output rather than the video input and output that you want. In our recent Labs test of graphics cards, for instance, only cards based on the HD2900XT chip included full video input and output. These cost around £250 each, and are poor value compared with cards that use Nvidia's competing 8800GTS chip.

This makes it tempting to buy a cheaper ATI card based on one of its older graphics chips. We particularly like Sapphire's X1950 Pro, which provides superb DirectX 9 game performance for just £94. It has composite, S-video and component video outputs, but no video input. Unfortunately, it's not such a good choice if you intend to upgrade to CrossFire. Although you could afford two X1950 cards for less than the price of one HD2900XT card, they wouldn't work



▲ Sapphire's X1950 Pro graphics card is great value, but tricky to use in CrossFire configuration

together. In order to use CrossFire, you'd need one special X1950 CrossFire Edition card, and these currently cost more than £200.

With this in mind, we suggest choosing a single, powerful graphics card rather than planning for a future CrossFire system. The EVGA 8800GTS is our favourite card at the moment as it provides good performance in both DirectX 9 and DirectX 10 for around £200. If you don't want to spend that much, the Sapphire X1950 Pro is a great choice, but remember that it'll need upgrading when DirectX 10 becomes the standard for 3D games.

University challenge

Q I'm off to university in September, and a family member has given me a PC to take with me. It currently doesn't have a processor, as the old one died some time ago. The motherboard is labelled "ASRock P4145D". I have hardly any money and can't afford even to think about upgrading the motherboard, so which processor would you suggest I fit? According to the manual it supports "Skt 478 with FSB 400/533".

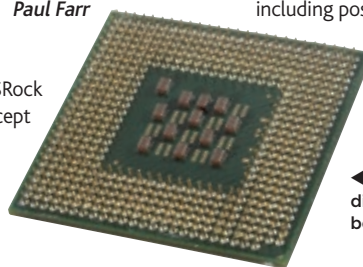
Paul Farr

A Your manual's rather cryptic instructions mean that the ASRock P4145D motherboard can accept any Socket 478 processor with a frontside bus speed of up to 533MHz. Originally it would probably have been fitted with a Pentium 4

processor running at between 2GHz and 3GHz, but these chips are very hard to find today as more recent Pentium 4 chips use the newer Socket LGA775. Similarly, Intel produced a range of low-cost Celeron D processors that used socket 478, but we couldn't find one for sale at any major online store.

To repair your computer at the lowest possible cost, we suggest looking on www.ebay.co.uk. We found used Socket 478 Celeron D processors selling for around £12 including postage, and new boxed ones for not much more. If you buy a used processor you'll also need to get a Socket 478 cooler if you don't already have one.

◀ Socket 478 processors were discontinued long ago, but they can be bought cheaply on eBay



DVD doctor

Q I have been using Nero to create home video DVDs, but I want my discs to look more professional. I'd like to add options such as chapters and a play all button, and to add a surround-sound soundtrack. Please can you advise me on which software I can buy to make my home movies look more like the ones you would buy from a shop.

Mark Alleyne

A There's a big step up in price between basic DVD authoring tools, such as the one included with Ahead's Nero, and professional

tools that allow you to customise every aspect of your DVD menus. Our favourite video-editing and DVD-authoring software, Sony's Vegas+DVD 7, is packed with powerful features but it costs around £400 including VAT. Fortunately, Sony also sells a cheaper version called Vegas Movie Studio + DVD Platinum. This includes version 4.5 of DVD Architect, and costs around £60 including VAT. It can encode 5.1 channel surround-sound AC3 audio files, although it lacks the panning tools built into the more expensive version, and it can create DVDs with multiple titles, multiple menus and chapters. You'll find a full list of its features at <http://tinyurl.com/ypag7b>.

Carry on caravanning

Q I currently own a Dell Dimension XPS T600, which I bought in 2000. It runs Windows 98 SE and is reaching the end of its useful life, with various things going wrong and problems when downloading updates from Symantec.

I am planning to take early retirement next year, and will be travelling the country in a caravan. On that basis, I think it would be a good idea to change to a notebook for use on the road and at home. I use the PC for email, the internet, Word, copying MP3s to an iPod, storing photographs and not much else.

I would like a sturdy machine, and low weight is not important. The ability to watch TV channels and play DVDs would be very nice. I'd like to spend up to £700. Could you point me in the right direction?

David Heasman

A If you have a power inverter in your caravan to charge a notebook, even a very inexpensive one will suit you. Acer's TravelMate 5520-5A1G12 costs around £380 including VAT, but it is solidly made and has all the power you'll need for Word, browsing the



▲ Acer's TravelMate is an inexpensive notebook ideal for use in a caravan

internet and watching DVDs. It doesn't have a TV tuner, but you can easily plug one into a USB2 port. See our Labs test of TV tuners on page 114.

Petite photo printer

Q I recently bought a Panasonic DMC-TZ2 digital camera. Although I enjoy viewing my photos on my notebook computer, I'd also like to be able to print them out for friends and family.

I already have a mono laser printer, so I'd rather not buy another inkjet that will take up lots of space and be used only occasionally to print 6x4in photos. Can you recommend a printer that's small

and can print 6x4in images at a cost of less than 30p each?

Anthony Young

A If you want to print photos only occasionally, you may not even need to buy a printer. Online services such as www.photobox.co.uk print 6x4in photos for as little as 4p each. To use them, you simply copy your pictures to your computer, then upload

them to the printing service's website. They print the photos and post them to you.

If you want your photos immediately, you could consider a small dye-sublimation printer. These are tiny, but they produce decent 6x4in photo prints in between one and two minutes. In *What's New*, October 2007, we reviewed Canon's Selphy CP740, which costs less than £70. A 108-picture supplies pack is available for around £23, so each individual print costs less than 25p.

Will an Apple be good for me?

Q I have an old Mesh PC that has served me well for about 11 years but is no longer fit for purpose. I want to buy a new desktop system; perhaps made by Mesh, Evesham, HP or even Apple.

I am not interested in video games, but I want to use word-processing and desktop-publishing software. I want fast access to the internet and to be able to download pictures, documents and classical music. I want to receive radio and TV and to download programmes to hard disk and edit them. Do I need separate TV and FM tuners or can I do this from the internet? I should point out that we live in an area of very poor reception: we require amplifiers for our TV and FM signals and can't receive Freeview.

My main musical interest is classical music and I have doubts as to the quality of commercially available music downloads due to the compression used. I would therefore like to be able to record concerts broadcast on Radio 3 using my FM tuner. This is part of a sophisticated hi-fi system located in a different room from my computer. I also have a digital camera and a digital camcorder, and I want to use my computer to edit the pictures and video I record with them. Clearly, I will need plenty of power and memory for all this, but how much?

As a technophobe, I also need a system that is easy to use, reliable and has good, friendly after-sales technical support. Should I consider changing to an Apple computer? They look good and reliable, but reviews suggest that upgrading and adding more

memory is not easy. They seem rather pricy, too, and I'm concerned that they might make it difficult to open documents created by family, friends and colleagues who have PCs.

Neil Bennett

A If you want a computer that's easy to use, and you're more interested in editing photos and video footage than playing games, an Apple computer could be a good choice. Apple's Mac OS X operating system is extremely simple to use, and all new Macs come with simple video- and photo-editing software as standard. If you want to get more creative, you could add more powerful software such as Adobe's Photoshop Elements for photo editing or Apple's Final Cut Express HD for video editing. Macs will open most common video and audio file formats, and if you buy a copy of Microsoft Office they'll open Word, Excel and other office documents created on a PC.

There is, however, some truth in your concern that Apple computers are hard to upgrade. We liked the last iMac we reviewed very much, but besides adding more memory to its one vacant slot there wasn't much room for internal upgrades. Since then Apple has renewed the iMac range, with 20in models starting at £799 including VAT. We'll bring you a full review soon.

If you decide not to make the jump to an Apple computer, there are many good Windows PCs that would

suit your needs. The £1,349 cost of a 24in iMac will buy you an extremely powerful Windows PC, such as PC Nextday's quad-core Zoostorm 5-7404, but there are many cheaper options that should suit you. PC Nextday's own cheaper Zoostorm 2-3413 Versatile costs just £449 including VAT, and with a dual-core processor and 1GB of memory it'll suffice for browsing the web, typing documents and editing photos and video.

Whether you choose an Apple or Windows computer, you will almost certainly need extra equipment to record TV and radio programmes. You'll find a comprehensive Labs test of TV tuners on page 114. Radio tuners for computers are rarer, but some analogue TV tuners can also receive FM radio broadcasts. It would be possible to record radio concerts by connecting an auxiliary output from your pre-amp to a sound card in your computer, but you would need a long cable to connect the two. ☺



▲ PC Nextday's Zoostorm 2-3413 should suffice for your needs